

a brief history...

One of the earliest references to the Dolphin is found in a document of 1454, but it certainly existed before then. 'Le Dolphin' can be shown to correspond with the south part of the modern Dolphin Hotel. It was often frequented by foreign merchants, and Italian seaman, whose ships were anchored in the harbour. Public entertainment was a regular feature of the Elizabethan period, and the yard at the Dolphin was a regular venue. Town records show payments being made to minstrels and other entertainers.

Many alterations have been made over the centuries, so it is not surprising that Molly, one of the hotel's six resident ghosts, walks the corridors with her legs below floor level. Remnants of the original medieval timbers, and stone vault remain within the core of the building.

The Dolphin had been a famous coaching inn since the 17th century. However, it was during Southampton's Spa-town period of 1750- 1820 that it also became a fashionable social centre for those who came to take the waters, both by bathing on the western shore, and by drinking the health-giving chalybeate spring. In 1768, Collyer's machines regularly ran between London and Southampton leaving the Dolphin at 5.45 o'clock in the morning. The fare was 16 shillings for insiders and 10 shillings for outsiders. It was in the late 18th. century that the Dolphin was substantially rebuilt with its handsome Georgian front, coaching entrance, and magnificent bow windows, which are believed to be the biggest in England.

The Dolphin was patronised by the 'nobility and gentry' and occasionally by royalty. Most famous guests included Queen Victoria, and Admiral Lord Nelson. Jane Austen celebrated her 18th. birthday there in 1793. Jane Austen lived in Southampton between the years 1806-1809. At this time the winter assemblies were being held at the Dolphin Hotel, once a fortnight on Tuesdays. It was at one of these functions in that Jane Austen scornfully commented that she regretted, "That so many young women were without partners, and each of them with two ugly naked shoulders."

As well as being a coaching inn and venue for the winter assemblies, the Dolphin also contained genteel shops, and a subscription coffee room called Brimyard's, where gentlemen could read both national and local newspapers. William Makepeace Thackeray, an astute observer of human behaviour, wrote part of his novel, 'Pendennis', while sitting in the Dolphin's magnificent bow windows. Another guest who frequented the inn was Edward Gibbon, the historian, while serving as a major in the Hampshire Militia.

In World War Two, the Dolphin narrowly escaped destruction by enemy bombers. A bell-boy later described how he heard the church bells of the adjacent Holy Rood ring-out as the church was consumed in fire. The Dolphin is closely associated with the history of Southampton. This wonderful hotel has recently completed a £4 million redevelopment programme and reopened its doors again on the 4th May 2010.

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